

Richard Morris Hunt House ("Hypotenuse")  
33 Catherine Street  
Newport  
Newport County  
Rhode Island

HABS No. RI-315

HABS  
RI,  
3-NEWP,  
33-

PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20240

## RICHARD MORRIS HUNT HOUSE ("HYPOTENUSE")

HABS  
RI,  
3-NEWP,  
33-

Location: 33 Catherine Street.

Present Owner: Mary G.C. Thomas.

Present Occupants: Mr. and Mrs. William S. Thomas, owner and her husband.

Present Use: Dwelling for two families.

Statement of  
Significance:

The "Hypotenuse" is particularly interesting as a house owned by the architect Richard Morris Hunt, 1870-1881. The house is a rich and varied composition of ornamental detail from several periods probably put together by Hunt. There is also a large room added later which is attributed to McKim, Mead, and White.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Original and subsequent owners:

The following is an incomplete chain of title from Newport City Clerk's Records for the city of Newport. Reference is to number and volume of the Land Evidence Books, (LEB.--, p.--).

1831 Deed of November 15, 1831, recorded in LEB. 18, pp. 433-34.

From: Joseph Cutler, for Susanna Coffin Jones  
To: Henry Schroeder, Jr. of Baltimore  
For: \$450

"... one undivided half ... lot of land ... bounded Southerly by Church Street, Easterly by Bellevue Street, Northerly partly by Touro Street and partly by land of Charles Whitfield, and Westerly by land of Records Heath and partly by land of said Whitfield ... one acre one quarter and 24 rods ..."

1831 Deed of November 15, 1831, recorded in LEB. 18, pp. 434-35.

From: Abigail Chesebrough Grant Cutler  
To: Henry Schroeder, Jr. of Baltimore  
For: \$450

"... one undivided half ..."

1833 Deed of December 13, 1833, recorded in LEB. 19, pp. 536-37.

From: Mary Heath, Elizabeth and Harty Heath, devisees  
of Record Heath  
To: Henry Schroeder, Jr.  
For: \$261

"... lot of land... bounded Southerly twenty three feet and three inches or thereabouts on Church Street, Westerly one hundred and seventy one feet on land of Daniel Peckham and on land now or late of John A. Shaw, Northerly about fifty three feet on land of Charles Whitfield, and Easterly one hundred and seventy two feet on land of the said Henry Schroeder, Jr."

1841 Deed of December 9, 1841, recorded in LEB. 23, pp. 502-03.

From: Henry Schroeder, Jr. of New York  
To: John Henry Gilliat  
For: \$6000

"... parcel of ground... bounded Southerly by Church Street, Easterly by Bellevue Street, Northerly partly by Touro Street and partly by land of Charles Whitfield, and Westerly partly by land of Daniel Peckham and partly by land now or late of John A. Shaw, and partly by land of said Charles Whitfield... Lot of land... with appurtenances..."

1847 Deed of October 13, 1847, recorded in LEB. 27, pp. 15-6.

From: John Henry Gilliat  
To: Henry Schroeder, Jr.  
For: \$3000

"... Beginning from the same at a point on the Westerly side of East Touro Street (formerly Bellevue Street) distant one hundred feet Northerly from the corner formed by the intersection of the Westerly side of East Touro Street, and the Southerly side of Church Street, thence running Southerly and bounding on the said

Westerly side of East Touro Street one hundred feet to the corner aforesaid, thence Westerly and bounding on the Northerly side of Church Street, three hundred and four feet, thence Northerly by a straight line one hundred and forty one feet six inches to a point on the line of land of Charles Whitfield, which said point is distant forty eight feet Northwesterly from the Southerly corner of said Whitfield land, thence Southeasterly bounding on land of said Whitfield forty eight feet to the said Southerly corner of Whitfield's land, thence also in a Southeasterly direction, by a straight line ninety feet eight inches to a point, which said point is distant by a straight line one hundred and fifty feet, Westerly from the first mentioned point on East Touro Street, and thence Easterly by a straight line one hundred and fifty feet to the point of the beginning or... a plat of which said granted premises is hereto annexed;... together with all and singular the buildings and improvements..."

1870 Deed of March 17, 1870, recorded in LEB. 41, p. 261.

From: Devises of Henry Schroeder, Jr.  
To: Richard Morris Hunt  
For: \$12,000

Although Richard Morris Hunt moved the structure located on the above described site to its present location, 33 Catherine Street, ca. 1870, he retained ownership of this property in addition to the adjoining estate, "Hilltop". Hunt's brother, the artist William Morris Hunt, had purchased this estate from John Henry Gilliat, April 3, 1856. (See LEB.33, p. 267.) On September 24, 1863, Richard Morris Hunt purchased "Hilltop", including 38,000 square feet of land from his brother. (See LEB. 37, p. 321.) The parcels of land, the Schroeder property and "Hilltop", were retained by Hunt and his heirs until 1910-1911. (See LEB. 94, pp. 137, 145, 195, 236.)

The building is presently located at 33 Catherine Street, Plat 26, Lot 5.

1870 Deed of July 30, 1870, recorded in LEB. 41, p. 575.

From: Robert Carter  
To: Richard Morris Hunt  
For: \$5295

"... parcel... bounded as follows: Northerly by

Catherine Street, one hundred and twelve feet, South-  
erly by land and premises of George H. Norman, one  
hundred and forty five feet, Easterly by land of  
Joseph J. Bailey, one hundred and fifty two feet, and  
Westerly by Greenough Place, one hundred and twenty two  
and a half feet..."

1881 Deed of March 1, 1881, recorded in LEB. 51, p. 73.

From: Richard Morris Hunt  
To: George E. Waring, Jr.

Title to this property was never cleared. In 1887 (see  
LEB. 57, p. 191; 58, p. 329), Waring received a lease-  
hold interest in the property for 999 years, "... from  
and after the twenty fourth day of April, 1822." The  
deed from Trinity Church, Edwin S. Burdick, Trustee,  
to Waring describes the property as "... being a por-  
tion of the Clarke or poor lot..."

1935 Deed of March 11, 1935, recorded in LEB. 133, p. 513.

From: George E. Waring, Jr.  
To: Guy Waring, by will

1936 Will of April 9, 1917, recorded in Probate Court Record  
Book 106, p. 540.

From: Guy Waring  
To: Elizabeth W.B. Waring, wife

"... all property and rights transferable of which I am  
or may be possessed..."

1937 Deed of February 19, 1937, recorded in LEB. 137, p. 535.

From: Elizabeth W.B. Waring  
To: Henry S. Wheeler

1939 Deed of April 4, 1939, recorded in LEB. 143, p. 69.

From: Henry S. Wheeler  
To: Annie E. Snyder

1939 Deed of April 5, 1939, recorded in LEB. 143, p. 71.

From: Annie E. Snyder  
To: Henry S. Wheeler

1941 Deed of May 10, 1941, recorded in LEB. 148, p. 137.

From: Henry S. Wheeler  
To: Chauncey Shackford

1959 Deed of August 17, 1959, recorded in LEB. 199, p. 80.

From: Chauncey Shackford  
To: Mary G.C. Thomas

2. Date of erection: Unknown
3. Architect: Parts by Richard Morris Hunt and possibly McKim, Mead, and White
4. Builder or contractor: Unknown
5. Original plans: The original plan and later additions and alterations are not clear, but the house would seem to have developed through at least four major phases. The original house seems to have been a very small, center chimney style building, which now comprises the entrance hall and stair hall at the center of the house. The floor framing of this part of the house is clearly separate from the rest and earlier, perhaps even 18th-century structure. Ceilings in this part of the house are lower, suggesting that the original house was two stories. During the Greek Revival period, about the second quarter of the 19th-century, this house was enlarged to a little less than the size of the present main block and was at least two stories. Greek Revival detail survives on the first-floor central portion, and on much of the second floor. The present porch columns may also date from this period. The ground floor rooms to the right of the entrance, to the southwest, were remodelled probably ca. 1850, with the large, heavy molding details typical of the period. The stairway from the second to the third floor may also date from this time. When Hunt moved the house to this site, ca. 1870, a bay was added to the southwest side. The dining room at the opposite end of the house, to the northeast, was remodelled, and the roof was altered to its present form. A large parlor was added to the south corner, ca. 1900, attributed to Stanford White. Probably at the same time, a large pantry was added to the northeast side. This pantry has been recently remodelled as a kitchen. The original kitchen, at the rear of the house, the southeast, has been remodelled as a small apartment. The Newport map of 1860 and earlier maps show this lot vacant. The 1870 map is the first to show this or any house on this lot. It was in 1870 that

Hunt acquired this property. He already owned a large tract of land at the corners of Bellevue, Touro, and Church Streets with several buildings. According to Mrs. Hunt's memoirs, he moved this house to its present site from "Hilltop" and remodelled it for his friend, Colonel George Waring. Waring later purchased the house and property. According to Newport Directories for this period, Hunt, who summered regularly in Newport, lived at the Bellevue site and never at the "Hypotenuse." The 1876 map of Newport identifies this house by the name, "Hypotenuse," when it was still the property of Hunt. Mrs. Hunt also called it by that name.

Local tradition attributes the rear parlor addition of ca. 1900 to Stanford White. While the standard literature on McKim, Mead and White does not mention this work, including Charles Moore's book on McKim with a full listing of the firm's buildings, The Life and Times of Charles Follen McKim, Boston; 1929, the room is stylistically consistent with the firm's other work of the period. It may well have been overlooked by the biographers, since it was a comparatively small commission.

6. Alterations and additions: Mentioned above
  7. Important old views: None known
- B. Historical Events Connected with the Structure:
- June 30, 1850, Jenny Lind was a guest of Mrs. DeRahm. On Sunday July 1, she sang at the residence of Henry Schroeder. Newport Daily News, July 30, 1850.
- C. Sources of Information:
1. Primary and unpublished sources:
    - Records of Deeds in Newport City Hall.
    - Notebooks on Newport buildings at the Newport Historical Society prepared by Mrs. Gladys Bolhouse, Mrs. George Downing and others.
    - Newport Directories for the 1860's, 1870's, and 1880's at the Newport Historical Society.
    - Howland, Catherine Clinton, The Richard Morris Hunt Papers, edited by Alan Burnham, unpublished manuscript in the American Architectural Archives.
  2. Secondary and published sources:
    - Downing, Antoinette F., and Scully, Vincent J. Jr., The Architectural Heritage of Newport, Rhode Island, New York: Clarkson N. Potter, second edition, 1967, plate 180.

3. Likely sources not yet investigated:  
Office records of Richard Morris Hunt.

## PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

### A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: This is a rich and interesting design with ornamental detail from a variety of periods. The house was owned for a time by Hunt. Much of the present appearance of the house is probably due to him.
2. Condition of fabric: The condition of the interior and exterior is excellent.

### B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: Rectangular main block, 55 feet wide, three double bays on facade facing northwest, by 32 feet, 20 feet by 30 feet wing to the south, 12 feet by 16 feet wing to the northeast.
2. Foundations: All foundations are fieldstone.
3. Wall construction: The exterior is framed with clapboards. The shaped-ended gables are finished with vertical siding and decorated brackets. The main gable over the entrance is decorated with sawn open work.
4. Structural system: The house is framed in wood.
5. Chimneys: Three brick chimneys have panelled faces of the 1870's period.
6. Openings:
  - a. Doorways: Panelled wood Dutch door in the entrance porch is set in a doorway with Greek Revival detail.
  - b. Windows: Most windows are double hung. The earliest windows have six-and-nine light sashes.
7. Roof: The mansard roofs with the high proportions of a hipped gambrel roof are covered with asbestos shingles. There is a broad projecting central gable with gambrel roof over the entrance. The other second-floor windows are contained in shed-roofed dormers. Open bracketed eaves finish the roof line.

8. Porches, stoops, and bulkheads: The recessed entrance porch has four Greek Doric columns.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plan: The wide central entrance hall terminates with a fireplace positioned on an axis with the doorway. The stair hall at the rear of the central unit is located behind the fireplace. Closets, passageways, etc. are located behind the stair hall. The remainder of the main block of the mid-19th century house contains the dining room and kitchen, the former pantry, to the left and the original kitchen to the left rear. To the right, a small sitting room or study is located behind the old parlor. The larger later parlor, ca. 1900, extends to the right rear from the study. The stairway leads to the second-floor hall and center front bedroom. Short flights of stairs at either end of this hall lead to the side bedrooms which are located over the higher ceilings of the first-floor rooms. The main stairway continues to the third-floor center bedroom.
2. Stairways: The L-shaped stairway to the second floor is enclosed. The open well stairway from the second to the third floor winds tightly on a plan slightly more than 180 degrees. The stairway has turned balusters and a molded hand rail.
3. Flooring: In the older parts of the house, the wood flooring is in random widths, 5 inches to 8 inches. In the later parlor addition, the flooring is of narrow strips.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: All walls and ceilings are plaster.
5. Doorways and doors: None of note.
6. Special decorative features: The style of the decorative detail varies from section to section of the house. The earliest detail is Greek Revival in style, with flattened moldings and flat panelled doorways. This is found in the central part of the first floor, and over much of the upper floors. The rooms on the right on the first floor have heavy rounded moldings typical of the mid-19th century. The rooms on the left and the exterior have detail dominated by flat boards with chamfered edges characteristic of the 1870's. According to the present owners, the rooms were originally (mid-19th century) a mahogany red color. The large new parlor is treated in a "Dutch" Colonial Revival manner, with a high mantel over the fireplace, a complex ceiling cornice with a (real) rope molding, and corner windows, one of which is developed into a cupboard.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The house faces northwest on a small level corner lot in a residential neighborhood of comparable houses. The house is placed diagonally on this corner lot, hence the name "Hypotenuse", by which the house has been known since at least 1876.
2. Historic landscape design: The informal gardens densely enclose the house.

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

Newport HABS Project -- 1969. Sponsored in cooperation with the Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission, Antoinette F. Downing, Chairman. Under the direction of James C. Massey, Chief of HABS, and Osmund Overby, (University of Missouri), Project Supervisor, Jack E. Boucher, photographer. Edited and expanded in 1971. Thomas M. Slade, (University of Notre Dame), Project Supervisor, Susan R. Slade, historian.